Nostalgia For a Past That Never Was: Marketers and the Invention of Tradition

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To create a pan-Indian, national marketing campaign is especially difficult because of the huge cultural diversity existing in India. What is Indian tradition when most rituals and symbols are tied to specific communities and geographies in India? Drawing from ethnographic work in the world of Indian advertising, we show that marketers are playing an active role in defining and re-inventing tradition. This paper contributes to scholarship on the globalization of the marketplace and the role of marketing in re-defining national identity.

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While the nation remains a frame of reference in many marketing studies, it is rarely examined as a construct. Consumer researchers have generally taken the nation for granted, as the natural political form of modern times. For example, consumer researchers have often used the nation in studies seeking to expose cross-cultural differences in consumer behavior (e.g. Clark 1990; Lin and Miller 2003). Researchers in marketing have also studied how institutions brand nations through campaigns such as “Cool Britannia” or Amazing Thailand” (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000). We need to go further in treating the nation as a specific type of institutional arrangement and as a structuring framework constructing people as citizens (Hammetz 1997). The nation is a relative newcomer in human history, yet we have to come to see nations as natural, as part of the landscape, without questioning how nations came to play such an important role in our lives.

As consumer researchers, we need to study the nation as an oddity if we want to fully understand how nations play such an important role in the life of consumers. Many brands rely on ideas and images of the nation to increase their appeal. For example, the Indian brand of motorcycle Bajaj has reached mythical status by claiming to be the motorcycle of all Indians through the slogan “Hamaara Bajaj” (our Bajaj). In Thailand, the brand of beer Chang rose to prominence by evoking the resilience of Thai people in the face of adversity, an especially powerful message after the financial crisis of 1997. There is also plenty of evidence that consumers care about the nation where products come from and that these concerns can transcend intrinsic product or brand attributes (Klein, Ettens and Morris 1998). While we know the importance of nations for consumers, we still know little about the role of marketers in strengthening this relationship.

Commercial practices have always played an important role in shaping notions of nationhood. In a seminal book, Anderson (1983) shows that newspapers, novels and other forms of print media played an important role in the emergence of nationalism: it was print media that allowed people to feel connected to other people in other places, even though they had never met each other. Print media allowed people to feel they were sharing the same landscape and the same time. Today, other types of media play a similar kind of role in building notions of what it is to be Indian, Thai, or American. The branding examples mentioned above are one of many instances where electronic media, in the form of branding messages disseminated through various channels, shape notions of what it is to be of a specific nation. Branding and other marketing activities help build the nation.

This session details this relationship between marketing practices and the nation in three diverse and complementary ways. Cayla’s paper investigates the role of marketers in shaping ideas about Indian tradition. Drawing from historical approaches on the invention of tradition (Hobsam and Ranger 1983; Bhabba 1990) this first paper examines how companies take customs that were tied to specific regions and communities, and re-invent them as Indian traditions. The paper contributes to our understanding of marketing globalization by going beyond the idea of companies adapting to cultural norms. This paper shows, with the detail afforded by ethnographic investigation, how even foreign companies and marketers play an active role in shaping ideas about the nation.

In the same vein, Mathew’s paper examines how marketing and advertising play an important role in erasing economic disparities and caste differences. An analysis of marketers’ efforts to sell the “India Shining” campaign is particularly helpful to understand the role of marketing in advancing the national project. Finally, Zhao and Belk’s paper offers a fascinating contrast to the Indian context. The authors take a historical perspective to show the role of advertising and marketing in fashioning ideas about Chinese modernity.

Overall this session fills an important gap in our understanding of marketing’s role in the construction of the nation. We believe a comparative approach that looks at China and India is especially important and novel. The comparison between India and China is pertinent in this specific context: both countries are extremely heterogeneous and marketing plays an important role in erasing this heterogeneity by inventing an Indian or Chinese consumer; both countries have faced many controversies regarding the arrival of foreign products and habits, encounters that continue to fuel nationalistic discourse. Such considerations are especially important given the current opening of these two countries to more and more foreign companies, and the accompanying rise of nationalistic and regionalist claims.

By looking at the relationship between marketing and the nation, we go beyond debates about the relative merits of globalization versus localization that exist in consumer research and in marketing. Further, our studies all question some fundamental principles and assumptions in consumer research, such as the tradition/modernity binary and teleological visions of history and the global economy. All three studies help de-construct the idea of “emerging markets” and help us reflect upon some critical issues for consumer research: how have nations come to be so important in consumer’s lives? What is the relationship between tradition and modernity in today’s globalizing world?

LONG ABSTRACTS

Nostalgia for a Past that Never Was: Marketers and the Invention of Tradition
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The globalization of the marketplace does not necessarily mean that the nation is withering away. The arrival of multinationals in emerging countries such as China and India has not eroded the importance of the nation. In India for example, the nation remains a powerful referent in many advertising campaigns. For example, in recent commercials for Indian property developer DLF, Bollywood film star Shah Rukh Khan invites audiences to say “no to Singapore, no Dubai, no London” and instead feel proud about the rapid development of large Indian metropolises (Cayla 2008). Indian traditions and rituals, rather than disappearing with the arrival of Western goods and services, are omnipresent on television, in newspaper ads or in cinematic representations of the Indian family.

Foreign companies and marketers play an especially active role in reviving and refining ideas about the nation, and especially what constitutes Indian tradition. For example, while diamonds have not, until recently, been a central part of bridal jewelry, the Diamond Trading Company tries to portray diamonds as...
auspicious and traditional by associating diamonds with a religio-
ritualistic imagery. Similarly, chocolate maker Cadbury has helped
promote regional rituals, such as Karva Chauth, a North Indian
ritual where a wife fasts for the well-being of her husband. This
goes against the notion that global companies necessarily emphasize their foreign-ness in emerging countries (see Batra et al.
2000) or that the arrival of foreign companies necessarily means that India is becoming more Westernized. Rather, the globalization of
the Indian economy has led to new articulations of what constitutes Indian tradition.

To appear Indian, many foreign companies emphasize the continuity with the past, endowing new types of commodities and
services with the aura of tradition. They have helped define what constitutes an Indian tradition, an especially complex task in a
country as diverse and cultural heterogeneous as India. In
analyzing this phenomenon, we draw upon the groundbreaking work of historians Hobsbawm and Ranger on the “invention of tradition” (1983). Hobsbawm and Ranger show that many practices which are considered traditional are in fact quite recent inventions, often intentionally constructed to serve particular ends. Hobsbawm argues that the invention of tradition occurs most frequently during periods of rapid “social change to establish or symbolize “social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (p. 9).

These insights about the invention of tradition in times of intense of social change are especially relevant to this study of foreign companies in their passage to India. In order to appear as “sons of the soil”, many foreign companies have used tradition as a sort of veil covering their foreignness, endowing products and services with Indian iconography, Indian rituals and situations. Drawing from prolonged ethnographic work conducted in India, we follow a select number of these foreign companies as they try to become more Indian. We analyze the process by which certain rituals and traditions that are specific to certain communities, such as Karva Chauth, become pan-Indian.

This study’s findings challenge the idea that emerging economies change the very notion of modernity. Rather, we argue that the spread of capitalism and the arrival of foreign companies contribute, among other social changes, to the reinforcement and the re-invention of tradition. These findings are consistent with past research highlighting that the technologies of capitalism create new spaces for the expression of tradition (see Chakrabarty 1998; Majumdar 2004; Mazzarella 2003; Gerth 2003). We show that the globalization of markets contributes to reinforcing, rather than diluting tradition and that the globalization of the marketplace is best understood as the development of alternative modernities. Furthermore, we use our findings about the invention of tradition to show how marketers help shape ideas about the nation. The relationship between marketing practices and nationalism is a dynamic one with marketers constantly helping define ideas of nationhood. Finally, we use our reflections to highlight the critical role of marketers in making and selling culture in the global marketplace. In doing so, we extend previous research on the shaping of cultural categories (see Thompson and Tian 2008; McCracken 1984) to a global terrain. Overall, this study helps change the way we view the role and importance of the nation in the globalization of the marketplace.

Imagining India:
Narratives of Class and Caste in Indian Advertising
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The narrative of India as the “next power to be” is dominant in newspaper stories and talk about India’s economic rise. The
great rise of the Indian middle-class has been celebrated as one of the greatest marketing opportunities of this new century (McKinsey 2004). Neo-liberalist discourses and images are also pervasive in Indian advertisements which celebrate the rise of urban, cosmopolitan Indians. However, this view is laden with tremendous structural anomalies at the ground level. In many ways, India remains extremely heterogeneous, with wide economic disparities existing across social classes and between the lower and upper castes. This paper first examines such disparities before moving to the realm of advertising and its role in imagining India.

While there are many signs of economic growth in India, the economic picture is not as optimistic as most media reports seem to suggest: throughout the 1990s, exports have been growing at a slower rate than imports; debt in dollar terms nearly quadrupled during the 1980s from around $20 billion to $82 billion in 1990; debt to banks and private individuals increased more than ten times from just under $2 billion to $22 billion (Chandrashekhar and Ghosh, 2002; Deshpande 2001). Most notably, there is tremendous mismatch between growth and its distribution leading to a rise in economic disparities (Kumar Singh, 2006:13). A 2006 United Nations report on hunger highlights that India has 221 million of its population undernourished ahead of sub-Saharan Africa’s 203 million and China’s 142.1 million (Times of India 2006).

Furthermore, while caste is usually absent from discussions in marketing and advertising departments, it remains highly pertinent to understand Indian material conditions. Caste is pervasive in rural India with numerous tragic cases of rape and murder on the basis of caste divisions. The argument that caste is a rural phenomenon also does not hold, for in cities, people doing menial work, cleaning sewage, toilets or doing domestic labour are all from the lower castes. In some cities, there might not be physical traces of untouchability but it has been replaced by social discrimination and exclusion. Caste is pervasive in all spheres and this has happened primarily because caste has had this historical ability to adapt to changing modes of production.

The objective of this paper is to show how marketing images and discourse erase, in the moment it takes to view a commercial, these drastic social and economic inequalities. Advertising historians have often highlighted the disjunctures between advertising images and the economic reality of the marketplace (see Marchand 1985). In this paper, we go through an analysis of Indian print and televised advertisements to illustrate such disjunctures in a Third World context. Across product categories, what comes out is a
dominant caste and class narrative.

We conclude by highlighting how such disjunctures become problematic and controversial. More specifically, we study in detail the India Shining campaign. Between December 2003 and January 2004, the political party in power broadcast a campaign to celebrate India’s economic success and prepare for the next election. The India Shining commercials aired 9472 times on all the leading television channels. The ads featured success stories of Indian entrepreneurs being able to start their business, students having access to education loans and increasing foreign exchange reserves. By examining this campaign and others, we show how advertising images and marketing rhetoric plays an important role in selling a certain idea of India, in imagining an India that can be sold to foreign companies and investors. By showing the role of advertising in advancing the national project, we show the intricate links between marketing and the construction of national imaginaries.

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Imagined Nationhood: Advertising Nationalism in Republican Shanghai

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Most research on Chinese advertising focuses on contemporary China and has ignored the country’s first encounter with global brands in the Republican era (Cochran 2007; Yeh 2007; Zhao and Belk 2008). In this paper, we examine how nationalism was represented and reinterpreted to promote consumption in Republican era Shanghai (1912-1949). We seek to understand how advertising contributes to the construction of an imagined national identity from a historical perspective (Anderson 1991; Appadurai 1996; Kemper 2001; Mazzarella 2003).

Despite its hostility toward Western commodities, China was quickly inundated by the flood of foreign goods with its defeat of the 1842 Opium War (Dikotter 2007). By the 1930s, Shanghai has become the fifth largest city in the world with a rampant consumer culture. Night clubs, department stores, theatres, amusement parks, golf courses, and dance halls constituted only part of its consumptioncape. Branded consumer goods from Japan, America, Europe, and Southeast Asia were on constant display (Chan 1999). The widespread desire for consumption was fueled by a sophisticated advertising infrastructure of billboards, radio, cinema, storytelling in teahouses, newspapers, and magazines (Crow 1937; Lang 2004). The desire for exotic commodities was also accompanied by resistance and boycotts against foreign imports (Gerth 2003). These boycotts were a part of China’s broader efforts in self-strengthening, but they were quickly turned into advertising campaigns to promote Chinese manufactured goods, or “national products” (Yeh 2007). A product could be either domestic or imported, and native or foreign, depending on its perceived place of origin. A product could also be seen as either Chinese or Western, and traditional or modern, given the differences between China’s past and present. Products such as Tobacco and matches could be national in the sense that they were domestically produced. At the same time, they were symbols of imperialism because cigarette smoking was an imported habit (Yeh 2007). Advertising mixed the foreign and modern with the Chinese and traditional. It was instrumental in domesticating a transformed way of everyday life in Republican Shanghai (Dikotter 2007).

Although Chinese consumers continued to embrace foreign products during the boycotts (Crow 1937; Dikotter 2007), advertising played an important role in articulating China as a modern nation state (Gerth 2003; Yeh 2000, 2007). The consumption of national goods was constructed in advertising as a fundamental part of Chinese citizenship (Gerth 2003). Nanyang Tobacco Company’s ads appealed to patriotism and urged consumers to support Chinese companies rather than brands of the British American Tobacco Company. The growing awareness of China as a nation with its own national products influenced the nascent consumer culture in Shanghai. Similar to the Republican era, tensions between the global and the local, and between consumerism and nationalism are still evident in today’s China. The country’s continuing rise to a major power in the world is accompanied by an increasing visibility of nationalism (Hughes 2006). There is now apparent pride in Chinese brands and renewed interest in its neglected past. Yet there is irony. In Shanghai, colonial mansions are being reopened and historical landmarks are being restored. Mao-themed restaurants invoke nostalgia for the hardships and poverty of the cultural revolution. Restaurants and shops are lionized for their connections to the early 20th Century Republican era. We also discuss the historic roots of such nostalgia.